

SUNDAY, MARCH 27, 1910

CLAY CLEMENT, ACTOR AND PLAYWRIGHT

By Florence Barlow Ruthrauff

Transcribed & edited by John M. Clement

WHEN Clay Clement died the stage lost one of its best actors. He was a playwright of ability, a writer of short stories and of poetry, besides being the best fellow in the world.

Every one that came in contact with him felt his magnetic influence.

His heart was as big as his body. I have seen the tears roll down his cheeks at the telling of some simple heart story like the loss of a child or a parent, even when the narrator was unknown to him. This great big fellow—big in heart as well as stature—had the temperament of the artist. He began his career under the famous Daniel Bandman¹, and what a Shakespearian training it was! Band-man thought Clement could not succeed until he had become a swordsman, and so he gave him a letter to an Italian fencing master who had a great reputation at the time, with instructions to “teach him to fence”—and he did.

Bandman was sailing for Europe and he wanted Clement to be proficient in the manly art of self-defense by the time he returned. The fencing master found Clement an intelligent pupil, and it was not long before he was able to defend himself against the master. And so he stayed on all Summer. When Bandman returned in the Autumn Clement went back and took up his playing again. It was several months before the bill for the Summer’s coaching was presented. Finally it came, just as the curtain was about to go up for the evening’s performance.

Duel In Reality.

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Years after when Bandman was down and out he went to Clement and asked him how he could get back in the profession. It was not an unusual thing for Clement to come in from the day’s work with empty pockets. The contents had been given to some actor in hard luck.

He would often say “I don’t think there is an old actor on Broadway that has not at some time been in one of my companies,” for Clement usually managed and staged his own plays.

McKee Rankin² and Clement worked together in those early days on the Coast—it was then that Nance O’Neil got her first part.

Clement began playwriting very early in his career, and he produced some masterpieces. There was a time when the “New Dominion” was being played by several companies, but no one but Clay Clement could have played the part of Baron Von Hoenstauffen. Mansfield might have, perhaps, but I doubt is even he could have given it the same daintiness of touch.

¹ From the Wikipedia: **Daniel E. Bandmann** (November 1, 1837 – November 23, 1905), was an internationally-known German-American Shakespearian actor who after retiring from the stage became a noted Montana rancher. In 1885 Bandmann published *An Actor's Tour: or, Seventy Thousand Miles with Shakespeare*

² Arthur McKee Rankin according to NY Times obituary was a well known Canadian actor who managed Nance O’Neill “elevating her to a position as a star and supported her in Shakespearian and other productions”

How Play Was Written.

The writing of this play came about in a curious way. Clement was cast for a low Dutch comedian's part, when he and Mr. Rankin were partners, and Clement made up his mind that he could not play it. Mr. Rankin suggested Clement creating a German for himself, and he did. The Alaphet scene was the result. It made such a hit that Clement afterward wrote the play around it. In this play is the famous prose masterpiece, the flower speech. The Baron has fallen in love with Flora May, a lovely young Southern girl. On the pretense of finding some rare specimens (for the Baron is a botanist), he stays on in Virginia. Flora May asks if he has found the specimen, and he answers "No." Then she offers to help him; if he will describe the flower to her, she will help him search for it. He answers:

"The kind of flower I allude to is indigenous to all climates. It has been known to the most superficial student of botany from the very earliest historical records, and has flourished, in various degrees of perfection, ever since. The first mention is made of it, I believe, in the Bible. It was then found only in the Garden of Eden. It is not of a tuberous, nor yet of a bulbous origin; strange to say, this flower has developed from a rib, taken from the genus homo. This appears to be most remarkable, and yet the best product of the species. It is also the only similar product derived from the same source, although billions upon billions of ribs have since been planted at all seasons of the year and in all kinds of soil. It appears that in its early development this flower had a very scant foliage. At first none at all, but nowadays the foliage is often so varied and extravagant in design and quantity as to puzzle the most learned scientist.

Has Far-Reaching Influence.

"It has always exercised a most powerful influence over the actions of man; in an imperfect condition, it breeds crime, sorrow and death; but when given a half chance it elevates man from a barbarous root later to the most noble being in all creation; it makes him considerate of his fellow-man, inspires in him a love for the beautiful of this world, it makes brighter the sunshine and gives comfort in the darkness. And when the cold hand of death rests upon his brow, that flower breathes in his ear a sweet hope that wafts his soul away from this world on her, fragrant bosom to the great unknown; this genus is commonly called woman."

This flower speech, so called, has been printed separately, and even now is being used in the Western colleges as a fine specimen of English literature. On his death the Austin College (Texas) wrote for copies of his plays, "A Southern Gentleman," "The New Dominion" and "Sam Houston," to be used, in the "teaching of Southern literature." Clay Clement's "Sam Houston" is regarded by the Texans as being the most authentic history there is of Sam Houston. This play was of too local a color to long interest the pleasure-loving metropolitan public, and yet to some serious minds it stands a great play, of a great man, written by a great man.

Clay Clement's mother was a Clay of Kentucky—a woman of gentle breeding. A friend of her youth was Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll³, who followed the career of his friend's son with interest.

Col. Ingersoll's Comment.

After seeing Clement in his "New Dominion" he wrote:

"Dear Mr. Clement—We were all delighted with your Hoenstauffen. I never saw a more refined character on the stage. The Hoenstauffen of your creation has the culture of the university, the high breeding of the court, the courage of the army and the courtesy and the

³ From the Wikipedia: **Robert Green "Bob" Ingersoll** (August 11, 1833 – July 21, 1899) was a lawyer, a Civil War veteran, political leader, and orator of United States during the Golden Age of Freethought, noted for his broad range of culture and his defense of agnosticism. He was nicknamed "**The Great Agnostic**".

charms of the perfect gentleman. Everything you did, every gesture, every pose, came from within from a clear, subtle and strong conception of the character. In no instance did you overstep the modesty of nature. From first to last you were absolutely consistent, neither too much nor too little, neither flood nor drought, but maintained for every moment artistic proportions. You are a natural actor and have the divine spark, the touch of nature, the poetic and pathetic intuition that cannot be acquired. I congratulate you. You stand on the threshold of a great career. Yours always. R. G. Ingersoll.”

George P. Goodale⁴ says of the same character: “In comedy the feathery Clement touch is proverbial. There has not been done anything neater, anything more buoyant, anything more humanly sympathetic, anything so irresistibly laughable in recent years as the Clay Clement Hoenstauffen.”

There are stacks of these kind of letters from great men that would be interesting to quote from, but from these one can make his own deduction. He was a scholar, a great actor and a humane human being.

Had Southern Flavor.

Everything Clement wrote had the savor of the South in it. If his play was not laid in the South his characters were Southerners, gone off on expedition—for the finding of gold, or something else. Whatever he wrote held you with its strong heart interest.

He has left behind a play full of the feeling of the North which will, when produced, rank with some of the great gold hunting plays that have been so popular in historical art the last few years.

Clement wandered off and gave up the stage and its craft for two years, only to return and electrify the South with his “Sam Houston.” These two years were spent in Alaska and in business. He would have been a prominent figure in the financial world with his wonderful magnetic power over men, but the call of the stage was strong.

A friend of Clement’s has a fine collection of old masters which Clement admired tremendously, and after a few days companionship with his friend he could describe the collection with as much feeling and apparent technical knowledge as his friend. One day in meeting an acquaintance who was something of a braggart Clement listened patiently, to the reciting of a long list of stocks and bonds, and then broke in, describing the collection of his friend as if it were his own. His descriptions of El Greco, Sir Thomas Lawrence, Burgnone and a few others passed muster, but when it came to his description of his Michael Angelo the braggart looked quizzical and told him he was indeed fortunate, as there were only two oil paintings of Michael Angelo’s in the world.

Love for His Mother.

Clay Clement’s love for his mother and little sister was one of the most beautiful things in his life. Afterward, when he had become a great actor and his sister had married a millionaire, she was so proud of her big brothers talent that she preserved every line that was written of him, and when he created a new part she would present him with a diamond.

Three beautiful stones bear witness to the trinity of his creations, Mathias in “The Bells,” Baron von Hoenstauffen in “The New Dominion” and “The Southern Gentleman.” These stones lie had set in a ring and gave to his present wife to sanctify and seal their betrothal. There would have been five stones instead of three had that sister lived to see “Sam Houston” and Clay’s wonderful interpretation of the dream man in “The Servant in the House.”

Mr. Clement lived to be over forty years old before a great love came into his life. It was just before “Sam Houston” was produced at the Garden Theatre that he married Kathleen Kerrigan.

⁴ George Pomeroy Goodale was dramatic editor of the Detroit Free Press and in his obituary the NY Times calls him “The dean of American theatrical writers”

So their honeymoon took place here in this big city, and what a mad one it was. They would jump on their two thoroughbred Kentucky horses immediately after the evening's performance and gallop through the park out into the country, coming home at dawn. The bride's horse would be decked with Autumn leaves, yellow goldenrod and purple asters.

At Clay Clement's funeral those two horses stood saddled and riderless beside his grave, led by the old negro Monroe, Clement's bodyguard and servant. There are many in the profession who remember this old black man.

The saddles had been made for Mr. and Mrs. Clement and their names were carved on them.

Even "Props" Genuine.

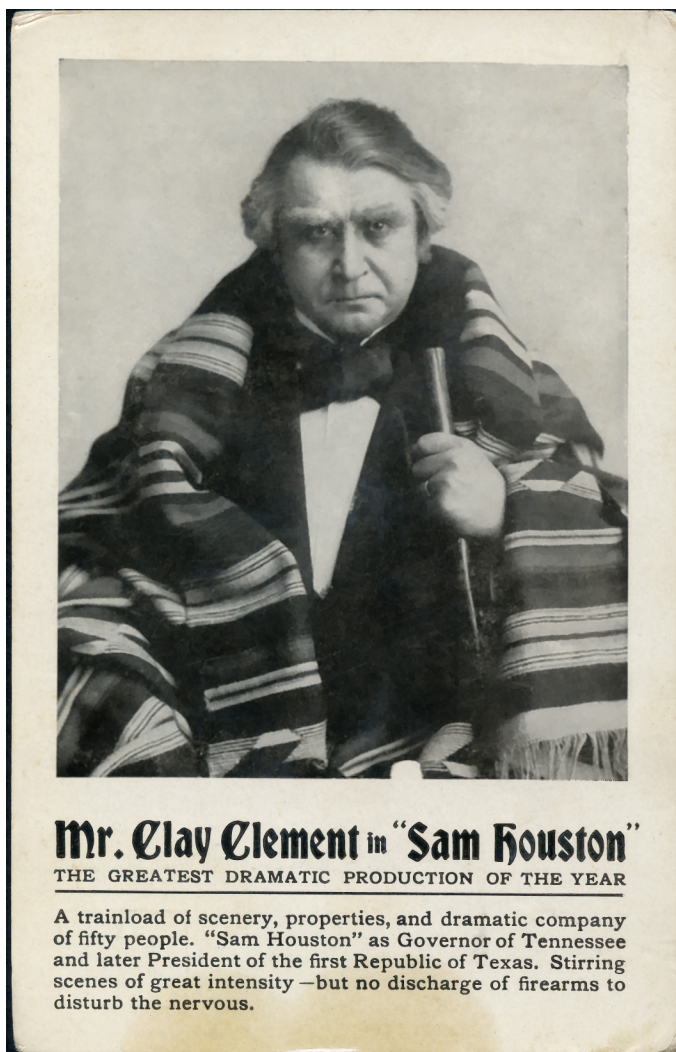
"Sam Houston" was a beautiful and extravagant production. The properties used were many of them things that actually belonged to the hero of San Jacinto. The rag carpet on the floor was one that Sam Houston's feet had trod upon. The rifles used in the play were old ones of that period bought up in Texas. Every detail was carried out with exactitude. Mrs. Clement wore the eardrops belonging to "Lady Houston," which were lent to her by the daughter of Sam Houston.

Mrs. Clement so endeared herself to the daughter that she spent a fortnight with Mrs. Clement as her guest, while the company was playing in New Orleans. The very soul of Sam Houston seemed to have entered the body of Clay Clement.

Charles Eugene Banks⁵ was a warm friend and great admirer of Clement's, and in speaking of his friend he says: "The triumphs of Clay Clement have been those of art; what he made in one play he put in another artistic production."

In speaking of Sam Houston, Mr. Banks says: "He is offering another great character to the stage—it will be as immortal there as it is in the history of America. Big it is—big as the world—a man of genius, guided by great intelligence, portraying the same type of man—Clay Clement is Sam Houston."

Clement himself says of Sam Houston: "No figure in American history, or any record of noble human deeds that I have studied, stands out in finer relief, in more enthralling isolation, is made more conspicuous by a more radiant halo of romance."



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Wife In His Support.

Mrs. Clement was always after their marriage Clement's leading support in his productions. At the present time Mrs. Clement is playing in one of Mr. Clement's sketches, "The Timely Awakening." Mr. Clement sold this sketch outright many years ago, and one night this past Winter the gentleman to whom Mr. Clement had sold the sketch was a visitor at his home, and in talking it over he declared that Mr. Clement must have had his wife in mind when he wrote the sketch. Mrs. Clement laughingly denied it, but said she would show them how well she could play it, and she began at once to act it out. That settled the matter, and she is still playing in it. At her first performance Clement sat out in front, though he promised he would not go. He laughed at the merry parts and cried in the pathetic ones as if he had never seen or heard of it before. Rushing behind the scenes he clasped her in his arms, crying, "Oh, grand fodine child, you have made me laugh so much and cry so hard," much to the amazement of every one behind the scenes, who recognized the great actor but did not know that Kathleen Kerrigan in real life was Mrs. Clay Clement.

Mr. and Mrs. Clement had a language all their own and it was quite impossible to be near them without adopting some of their words. "Fodine" stood for the "finest" and "best" in their vocabulary.

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An Imaginary Child.

The Clements had an imaginary child—"Little Kottie" they called her. So real was it to them that the company began to believe and feel that the child really existed. They each wrote letters to the child, and in them apologized and straightened out their little misunderstandings, asking the child to intercede one for the other. It was a charming myth.

Another of their myths was their "Phantom Ship," which was to sail away for twenty years, the period of life's greatest enjoyment, carrying for its cargo congenial souls. An annuity was to be set aside for each, so that they would not suffer from their long period of idleness—for to be eligible as a passenger one must have brains and temperament—but would be left on shore with a mind stored with golden memories to battle against old age.

Clay Clement is now riding on his phantom ship.

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Mr. Clement was playing at the time of his death in "The Servant in the House." The last words he uttered were in his poet tongue:

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Article found in a scrapbook created by Clement Alvin Geiger, Clay's nephew. The scrapbook was kindly loaned to the editor by Janet Geiger, his granddaughter. The partially restored pages of the scrapbook with the article are reproduced here. The original punctuation, capitalization and spelling have been retained in the transcribed version.

Advertising undivided post-card owned by J. Clement, descreened and restored by him.

Some details of this account coincide with what John M. Clement, Sr, Clay's grandson, said about him. Clay was known to be difficult to get along with, but also was very generous with his money. Many directors refused to handle him because of his obstinate nature.

The family story was that Clay's name had come from Clay county Kentucky, which jibes with the account in this obituary. Clay's birth name was Clement Laird Geiger.

This account leaves out the fact that Kathleen was the third wife and that the second one attended his death bed. Kathleen and Clay were divorced from their former spouses just days before their "elopement". Also the fact that Clay had an estranged actor son (Claudius Geiger, AKA Clay Clement, Jr.) was not mentioned. The son blamed Kathleen for breaking up the marriage with the second wife whom he liked.